

# Asbestos



## The National Asbestos Exposure Review

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### **The problem: asbestos in vermiculite**

Vermiculite, a naturally occurring mineral compound, was mined in Libby, Montana, from the early 1920s until 1990. Before the mine closed in 1990, most of the world's supply of vermiculite came from Libby. Vermiculite from Libby was found to contain high levels of asbestos. Handling and processing of this vermiculite released asbestos fibers into the air, and mine workers and people living in Libby were exposed to harmful levels of asbestos. Health studies conducted in the Libby community found elevated levels of asbestos-related health effects.

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### **The response: The National Asbestos Exposure Review**

The Agency for Toxic Substances and Disease Registry (ATSDR), the public health agency charged with evaluating human exposure to uncontrolled releases of hazardous substances, is conducting a review of sites around the country that received Libby vermiculite. The National Asbestos Exposure Review (NAER) will evaluate the potential for exposure to asbestos at more than 200 sites around the country that received shipments of vermiculite from the mine in Libby.

In the first phase of the review, 28 priority sites are being evaluated. These sites, referred to as the Phase 1 Sites, were selected on the basis of the following criteria:

- The U.S. Environmental Protection Agency (EPA) mandated further action at the site on the basis of current contamination at the site, or
- The site was an exfoliation facility that processed more than 100,000 tons of Libby vermiculite.

Exfoliation is a processing method in which ore is heated and "popped," and it is expected to release more asbestos into the air than other methods of processing. Asbestos fibers are too small to be seen by the naked eye, and they float in air. If people breathe air containing asbestos fibers, the fibers lodge in the lungs and remain there.

When asbestos fibers are breathed into the lungs they remain there for a lifetime. In some cases, these fibers might damage the lungs or the lining of the lungs and lead to illness and even death.

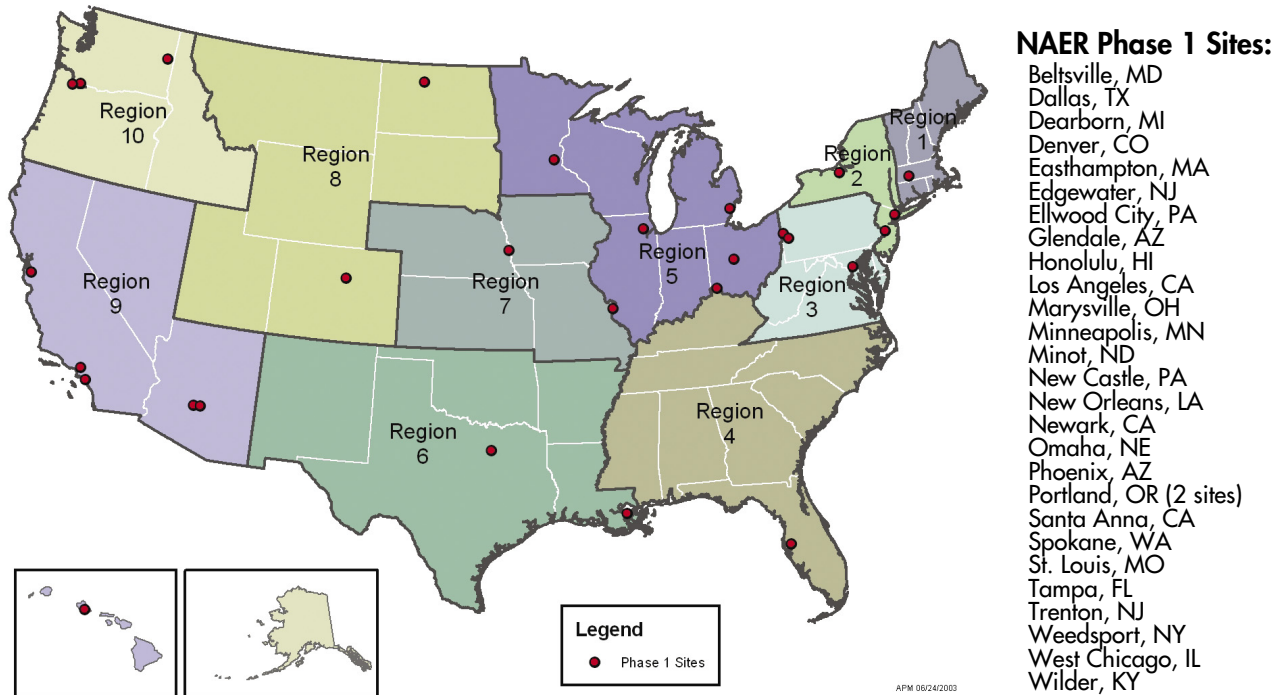
The mine in Libby closed in 1990, and no Libby vermiculite is being shipped or processed now. However, exposure may be ongoing from asbestos contamination at some sites and from any waste rock people may have taken home for their personal use.

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## Site review

ATSDR and its partners began conducting site reviews in 2002 on the 28 Phase 1 sites. These sites received the majority of the vermiculite mined in Libby from 1964 through 1980. Processing sites will be evaluated by:

- Identifying ways people could have been exposed to asbestos in the past and ways that people could be exposed now, and
- Determining whether the exposures present a human health hazard.



## Health consultation

After the exposure evaluation is completed, ATSDR will present the results of the evaluation in a **health consultation** on the site. For sites that processed Libby vermiculite, the health consultation document will provide health conclusions and recommendations for potentially exposed populations, including former workers and their families, current workers at the site, residents currently living near the site, and residents who formerly lived near the site when the vermiculite was being processed.

ATSDR released its first NAER health consultation in the fall of 2003. Review of the 28 sites should be completed in 2005. A future report will summarize findings at these 28 sites and will include recommendations for evaluating the other sites.

## How can states get involved?

States that have cooperative agreements with ATSDR have the opportunity to conduct health consultations for sites in their state. ATSDR can also provide state partners with technical guidance and support, and health communication and health education resources.

## For more information

For more information on the National Asbestos Exposure Review:

- Call ATSDR's Information Center at 1-888-422-8737.
- Visit the NAER Web site at [www.atsdr.cdc.gov/naer](http://www.atsdr.cdc.gov/naer)